

The Wrong End Zone

by Lt. Charlie Brown



target area, I could see the elevated target. We still had almost 10 minutes to go. As we approached our 10-mile IP, my RIO called, "Tally the target." I agreed.

The center hikes the ball for the final play, but there is a miscue between him and the quarter-back; the ball is on the ground!

We "tac turned" into the target area and started our 30-degree climb to get to our pre-briefed

Fallon SFARP. Unit-level, air-to-ground training that signaled the start of our work-ups. Our first mission was an opposed, section low-level through the Nevada desert. The route would drop us off in the B-20 bombing range complex, where we would drop two Mk-82s on "Lone Rock."

The brief covered all the necessary items for the route, and we looked at target-area diagrams, as well as close-up photos of the Rock. Everyone said the target stood out and would be easy to find. Besides, having dropped in that target area during our previous work-up, I was sure we would find the correct target.

You'll appreciate the fiasco that follows using a football analogy. It's the fourth quarter: 30 seconds to go, you're behind, and they have the ball.

The route went well. We trounced our airborne opposition and were right on time. On the northbound leg, located west of the

delivery roll-in altitude of 23,000 feet. In the climb, I became slightly sucked on the lead as I started to timeshare between formation flying and scanning in the target direction. I also noticed there was a thin layer of clouds above that looked lower than our planned roll-in altitude.

As we hit 19,000 feet, I lost sight of my lead for a moment and leveled off back at 18,500 feet. I quickly found him again and realized I was now out of position on my lead. I still had the target in sight.

There's a mad scramble for the ball, but it shoots out of the pile right into your hands. You take off for the end zone!

I flattened out at the top of my delivery profile as I heard my lead call, "Off, no drop." SWATSLANT instructors were evaluating this hop, so I thought, "That can't be a good thing."

Once in my dive, I saw my pipper rapidly approaching the target and actually go through the aim point. My hits might be

a little long, but bombs would come off first pass.

You've juked two players and have a free shot for the score...only a few more steps.

As I pulled off, I looked back and saw the bombs hit just long of the target. My RIO said, "Uh, oh." Then the range-safety observer said, "Do not bomb wing's hits. They are out of the live-impact area!"

You cross the goal line just as you are tackled...in your own end zone. You lose!

What the hell happened? Turns out we put two Mk-82s close to a building in the light-inert area of B-20, several miles north of our intended target. From my review of the events, I counted seven links in the chain of this near mishap.

1. Easy target. Yes, I saw some target photos and looked at a target area diagram. I didn't study what could draw me off the target I was going after.

2. Tally the target. Before reaching the IP, my RIO and I both called, "Tally the target," 10 miles away at 1,000 feet. At the time, we never discussed whether we were looking at the same target nor did we discuss target acquisition after that point. In this case, the target looked very different at 19,000 feet compared to 1,000 feet.

3. Soda straw. After seeing the height of the target from the IP, I bought off on a target that was in line with Lone Rock, but well short of our run-in line. My scan broke down as I approached the target because of my splitting concentration between flying formation and the approaching cloud layer. During the climb, I should have been asking myself how I could be sure it was the target.

4. Weather. Not being able to deliver from our pre-briefed parameters is reason enough to take it around to try again. There was no reason to press this delivery during a peacetime mission.

5. Formation. If I had been in proper formation, I would have recognized that we were rolling in on different targets.

6. Crew coordination. When we hit the cloud layer, my RIO became more concerned with clearance within the section, and once I called, "Tally," he just started giving me delivery information (dive angle, airspeed, altitude), instead of being heads out trying to see where we were aiming. The RIO also has bearing and range information to the designated target. If we had been looking at that information, we would have seen that our roll-in point was well short of the intended target.

7. Mindset. Bombs on target, on time, first pass. How many times have we heard that? After I heard lead call, "No drop," I felt greater pressure to get something off to continue with our (thus far) successful hop. But no training hop, especially with live weapons, is worth mistaking a target for the benefit of bombs off, first pass.

Breaking any one of these links could have stopped this near-catastrophe from happening.

No amount of preflight target study is too much. A division had gone out on the same hop earlier that morning. They certainly had HUD footage that could have been used by any of us to show what we could expect to see in the target area.

Scan around the target. Not only can you confirm other geographic references to verify the target, but real-world threat missiles and AAA probably won't be coming from the target under your crosshairs.

Once off briefed delivery parameters, you should really be asking yourself why you should continue with this delivery. Frag wasn't a player for us with this delivery, but what about those on the ground?

On target, on time is a level to train to, but not at the expense of safety.

We were fortunate that the bombs did fall on the range and no one was hurt. We all know that has happened in the past. I never thought I would drop on a misidentified target, and I took a hard look at what made me do it this time. Don't fall into the category of "it will never happen to me."



Lt. Brown flies with VF-11.